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## Swifty's Effigy



The child in the photograph stoops in mid-bow, arms hidden like a dodo in tiny fancy overcoat, woolen hat atop his head, pigeon toed in ankle-high tap shoes: this is the image that I share when I try to reply to questions about my roots. Before my mother died, I went to say goodbye. She lived in Claypoole Courts, a Washington, DC Section 8 Housing Project with my brother. Today the once poor, drug-infested neighborhood along 14<sup>th</sup> is wholly gentrified. She died in the early autumn a few months after that day in the summer when I last saw her.

A week before that summer day, my brother, mother and I traveled to Philadelphia to pick up her effects from my uncle. At the 30th Street Station, my mother stopped twice to vomit blood into the trashcans. My mother lived with intolerable illnesses all of her life: schizophrenia, thrombosis, polycythemia vera, and all the stages of breast cancer, including the final invasive stage that metastasized to her bones and killed her. After the whole side of her chest was gutted in a coarse mastectomy, she refused to wear her ill-fitting prosthesis, the kind given to women who cannot afford topnotch medical care. After one of her many treatments she brought us into the hospital room, took off the top of her paper gown and showed us the impossible scars and cavernous womb where breast and flesh once laid. Yes, she looked strange, she said, but we ought not to be embarrassed when people stared at her for having one breast. That moment of sharing put everything into perspective. She wanted us to understand what was happening to her, to bear the strangest possible witness.

No one had to remind me to make sure that I said the things that needed to be conveyed before the final moment. I knew instinctively when to say my goodbyes. When her final illness came, I was numb and prepared. I did not cry. I was not devastated. How could I be devastated by my mother's death when everyday of my childhood with her was devastating? I always knew my mother would die in great pain because she lived every day in great pain. The only question was when.

That day at Claypoole Courts (a week after our trip to Philadelphia), I asked my mother if I could have all of the objects pertaining to myself amongst her belongings. She replied, "But what will I have of you?" and then she gave her blessing for me to remove the objects. There was very little furniture in that apartment. My mother kept most of her belongings within four purple suitcases of varying sizes neatly divided into plastic storage bags. Those suitcases had followed my mother, brother, and I through a maze of dwellings and homeless shelters over the years and still remained intact. I searched inside the suitcases and found all of the photographs of myself as a child when I performed for the stage.

When I came to the image that appears at the left she said, "Remember: that's your grandfather." I was curious as to why the image was kept with my objects. She said that it was because I looked almost exactly like her father and she went on to tell me that the image (which she said was from the 1920s) is an excerpt from a larger staged government photograph taken of my grandfather mock-playing in the streets with other poor Harlem children. The image is within the public domain. I searched for the provenance of the photograph for many years and, as the Internet expanded and public domain image archives proliferated, I was finally able to discover the larger photograph from which the excerpt came.

But even after phone calls to the National Archives, I was not able to discover the names of the children depicted, the date of the image, and the name of the photographer. One recurring detail from my sleuthing within the archival record made me doubt parts of my mother's identification: online sources said that the photograph dated from the early 1930s, which would make my grandfather a little younger than my mother's description.

I had only met my grandfather once. Everyone called him Swifty. That was in 1976 when he came to deliver a car to my mother and to pay her a debt. I watched my mother and her father argue furiously at the backdoor and my mother threw some money at him. Yes, I only knew what my mother told me about my grandfather: that he was a child entertainer of fly-by-night devised performances (like busking on the street); that he spoke multiple languages including Hebrew, Yiddish, and Italian; that he played many instruments; and that he was a "runner" for several criminal cartels on the Northeast coast. Who to believe?

When I moved to put the little image back my mother said, "Keep it," and she put it in my pocket. Then she explained that the photograph was a manifestation of my roots. She apologized profusely for whatever she did that contributed to the great hurt of our broken family. She apologized that I had never really known either of my grandfathers. Then she coughed herself to sleep in my arms and the blood stained my shirt.

On my way to the bus station after seeing my mother that day, I stopped by the filthy old laundry near the housing project. The laundry had a small incinerator at the back. With the attendant's help, I put the bloody shirt into the incinerator. Then, with an odd surety that I cannot explain, I dumped all of the little objects that I collected from my mother's apartment into the incinerator too. But when I finally got home I realized that I had not burned them all: the photograph of Swifty was still in my pocket where my mother had placed it.